

“DER BÜCHERBUND.”

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I.

WHAT THE GERMANS WERE DOING IN LITERATURE UP TO THE
BEGINNING OF THE CRUSADES.

The Germans are proud of being able to trace back their literature to the year 350, at which time the old heathen folksong (*Volkslied*) began to make itself heard. Of this song there are two species: the one dealing with the gods (*Götterlied*), the other dealing with the heroes (*Heldenlied*). Wotan or Wodan—he is better known to us by his Scandinavian name of Odin, though the German form of the name lives in our *Wednesday*—would be a theme of the one; Hildebrand* occurs again and again in the other.

The remarkable event to which the Germans give the name of “*Völkerwanderung*” put an end to the old “*Götterlied*,” and greatly modified the “*Heldenlied*.” The huge empire of the Goths was laid waste by the Huns. The journey westward of the nations began. We have Teutons lording it in Italy; some—under Alaric—in Rome itself; Teutons pass into Gaul, and Teutons cross the sea to Britain. The whole of western Europe is peopled anew. About the year 600 the wanderings of the Teutons cease. Some of them have settled down in Gaul, henceforth to be known by the Teutonic name of France; some of them have settled down in Britain, henceforth to be known by the Teutonic name of England. But they have become separated: the sea divides them, and the Rhine divides them. They have become a different people, nay, different peoples. Many things must change, and did change; first and foremost among them, the old god-worship and the old hero-worship. One God took the place of the gods, and the “*Götterlied*” ceased to be. The

* Hildebrand was that German warrior who, having lived so long in exile as to be forgotten by his kinsfolk, was challenged to combat by his son Hadubrand.

so-called “*Wesobrunner Gebet*” (prayer of Wesobrunn) is peculiarly interesting as marking the transition from the old gods to the new God. It is supposed to date from the eighth century, is written in alliterative measure, and was found in the cloister of Wesobrunn, in Bavaria. Anyone reading it cannot fail to see that the old worship was as yet not wholly shaken off even by him who here proclaims the new. That God is a spirit he has not seized. There is a wonder most wonderful, he says, of which men tell; when earth was not yet, and heaven was not yet, when not yet was a tree and not yet was a mountain, when not yet shone the sun and not yet gleamed a star, when not yet beamed the moon and not yet the sea glittered, when not yet there was aught, not yet room, not yet space; there was yet God Almighty, *the mildest of men*.

In “*Muspilli*”—this curious name means world-fire,—which poem dates from the ninth century, we are given a description of the Last Judgment. How the old poet, half heathen still, revels in the terrors of the theme! The mountains are afire, he tells us; not a tree stands fast in the earth, the streams dry up, the great seas are swallowed up, the skies are consumed by fire, the moon falls, the round earth is aflame, the day of doom has come upon the lands, it visits the people with fire, kinsman cannot help kinsman now the *muspilli* has come.

“*Heliand*,” with its gentler name—the word is a form of *Heiland*, the Healer, Saviour—strikes a softer note, and tells in Old-Saxon the story of Jesus according to the Gospels, as read, it must be understood, in Germany of the ninth century by a poet of the people, simple of thought and rude of speech, but earnest and, up to his lights, a good man of religion. Such a paraphrase of the Gospels as this “*Heliand*” the Germans call an *Evangelien-Harmonie* (Concord of the Gospels). Hearken to the simple-hearted old paraphrast.

“This heard I, that Mary was warned by the will of God that a son should be given to her; born he should be in Bethlehem, and mightiest of men born he should become; and should be King of kings. And there came to the light of day *the mighty hero*. . . . The mother took him, and she robed him in raiment, the fairest of women; in comely clothing she clad him, and with her twain hands she laid in a crib *the little dear man*, the child, that withal had God’s might.”

“*Der Krist*”—the Christ—is the name of another of these

paraphrases. It is the work of a Friar, Otfried, who lived towards the close of the ninth century, and whom the Germans regard as the first truly Christian German poet. A native of Lower Alsace, in days when Alsace was Franconian, and Franconian was German territory, Otfried spent the greater part of his life as a Benedictine in Weissenburg, that fair little town on the Lauter, where modern Frank and modern Teuton fought so direfully one autumn day of 1870.

So far is the good Friar from confining himself to paraphrasing the Gospels—though his work purports to be such a paraphrase—that he indulges in a lengthy eulogium of the Franks in the course of "Der Krist," winding up triumphantly with the words, "In good sooth, I have read in a book, I know where [it may be mentioned in parenthesis that he does not *say* where; it cannot, surely, have been in any of the four Gospels] that they were kith and kin of Alexander's kin."

One of the most interesting works of this old period is the "Ludwigslied"—Song of Ludwig. The name may make the unwary look for a *Heldenlied*, but the song of Ludwig, though indeed its theme is praise of the king who vanquished the Normans at Saucourt, was written, like the poems mentioned above, within cloister-walls, was the work of a priest, and has, as much as any poem of its time, the smell of midnight tapers.

To these few German compositions might be added a host of Latin ones, interesting inasmuch as, though they did not help to mould German speech, they did help to shape German thought. Three persons may be mentioned in this connection—Ekkehard, Schreiber Konrad, and Hroswitha. Of the last I am tempted to give a short account. Hroswitha, nun and poetess, was born in 935, and was of noble Saxon race. A writer of fluent Latin, she had—some will be shocked to learn—made Terence her model. No less than six comedies did she write in imitation of this admired, but not, it must be said, revered Roman poet. It is only fair to add that the Saxon nun wrote also eight legends, and composed a long poem in hexameters on King Otho the Great.

While the *Götterlied* had thus made way for Christian compositions, the *Heldenlied* underwent considerable modification. It was, as has already been pointed out, no longer the song of one German people, but, in the lips of some, a song of Franconia, in which the hero was Siegfried; in the lips of some,

a song of Burgundy, in which the hero was Günther; in the lips of some, a song of Hungary, in which the hero was Attila; in the lips of some, a song of the East, in which the hero was Dietrich; finally, in the lips of some, a song of the sea, in which the *heroine* was Gudrun. In the language of German critics, these are the different "cycles" of the *Heldenlied*, when it had become a song of a people who had ceased to have one home, and so had ceased to have one hero.

A few words must be said about the different figures upheld as models of heroism in different parts of this great Teutonic realm. Siegfried—he of the horned skin—is of mythological antiquity, and occurs under different names in numerous Teutonic and Scandinavian songs. He is mentioned in the Edda, but is of crowning importance in the "Nibelungenlied."

Günther is no mythical person, though myths grew up about him. He is identical with that King Gundicar of Burgundy—in days when Burgundy was German—who fell in battle against King Attila.

Attila—called Etzel in the Nibelungenlied—is also a person, as everyone well knows, belonging to history. Fiction, not fact, is, however, what we hear of him in the Nibelungenlied.

Dietrich is but a form of the name Theoderich. History tells us of a brave Goth so called who in the fifth century made himself master of Italy, where one of his favourite residences was Verona, whence the name he has in German song of *Dietrich von Bern*—a name which has led a good many mistaken people to regard him as a Swiss, a sort of olden Tell.

Gudrun, the central figure of the epic, which is sometimes termed "the German Odyssey," is in it represented as a Northern Princess, with some Irish blood in her veins.* She preferred washing clothes in the sea to marrying a prince whom she did not love, and would not change her nay to yea even when tied to a bedpost with the promise of a whipping if she persevered in her stubbornness. She maintained that she could bear the whipping; and she bore it. She was, if one may so say, an impatient Griselda, suffering quite as much as that lady did, but not with that lady's calm. Her charming story does not read like a page in history, but one likes to think, and dares to hope, that brave, true-hearted Gudrun lived.

* Her great-grandfather was King of Ireland.

Such were the characters—these are but four among many—with which song was busy in olden Germany. *Lied* followed *Lied* until, in the twelfth century, the number of them had become so many that Somebody Somewhere (who it was, where it was, nobody knows at this day) bethought him of stringing the stray songs together, and gave to Germany the Nibelungenlied and Gudrun. These works, as compilations, belong to the second period of German literature, the period following the year 1150, but the material used in them belongs to the first period of German literature, and the answer to the question, "What were the Germans doing in literature up to the beginning of the Crusades?" is this:—They were singing the stray songs which were afterwards strung together and named "Nibelungenlied" and "Gudrun." *That chiefly.* At the same time their priests were paraphrasing the Gospels. They possessed the whole Bible, not only in the learned language of the original, but in a translation of one of their own bishops. As early as the fourth century Ulfila had translated it for them. From this translation of the Bible by Ulfila, as the oldest monument of German speech extant, I give an extract, with a literal translation subjoined.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW, VI. 9-12.

Sva nu *bidjaith* jus. atta unser th in himinam *veihnai* namo.
So now pray ye. Father our, thou in heavens, hallowed-be name
thein. qimai thiudinassus theins. *vairthai* vilja theins sve in himina jah
thine; come kingdom thine; be will thine, as in heaven, also
ana airthai. hlaif unsarana thanan sinteanan gif uns himma daga-
on earth; bread (loaf) our this ever give us this day;
jah *aflet* uns thatei skulans sijaima svasve jah veis *afletam*
also forgive (off-let) us whatever guilty-of we-be, like-as also we forgive (off-let)
thaim skulam unsarm. jah ni briggais uns in fraistubnjai. ak
them that-trespass against-us; also not bring-thou us into temptation, but
lausei uns af thamma ubilin. unte theina ist thiudangardi jah
deliver (loose) us from this evil; for thine is kingdom, also
mahts jah vulthus in aivins.—AMEN.
might, also glory, in eternity.—AMEN.

As showing the state of the German language five centuries after Ulfila's time, that is to say, in the ninth century, I subjoin (also with a literal translation) a passage from Otfried's "Krist"—the passage commented on above.

PRAISE OF THE FRANKS.

Sie sint so sáma kuani sélb so thie románi; ni thárf man thas
ouh rédinon, thas kriáchi in thes giuúdaron.
also say that Greeks to-them this deny.

Sie éigun in zi nuzzi so sámalicho uuízzi; in félde joh in
uuálde so sint sie sáma *balde*; Ríchi duam ginúagi, joh
forest(wold) thus are they same bold. (In) might enough (rich) aye
sint ouh filu kuani, zi uuáfane snelle; so sínt thie thégana alle.
are-they also very bold, to weapons quick; so are the warriors(thanes) all.

The meaning of all this would seem to be: They (the Franks) are as bold as the Romans, nor shall any man say that the Greeks deny this. They have (and a very useful thing it is) just the same wisdom in the field as in the forest; they are equally bold in both places. Mighty enough, they are (this cannot be said too often) very bold; quick to take up arms, as beseems warriors.

True enough, every word of that, good Friar Otfried.

(To be continued.)

Some questions for students of the above:—

1. Give the German modern cognates of *bidjaith*, *veihnai*, *vairthai*, *afletam* (these words italicised occur in the extract from Ulfila's Bible), *tharf*, *rédinon*, *in*, *balde* (these words italicised occur in der Krist).

2. Point out in the Bible-passages:—

- (a) Peculiarities of punctuation.
- (b) Three letter-combinations no longer used in German.
- (c) Three words which in no form now exist in German.

3. Turn the passage in praise of the Franks into modern German, retaining the original words and order of words wherever possible.

Students who find the above questions too difficult can write instead a short summary in German (maximum number of written pages, four; minimum number, two) of this article on the first period of German literature.

Modern Works of Fiction on this Period:—

- "Sind Götter?" (short tale), by Felix Dahn.
- "Der Kampfum Rom,"*
- "

* These works, which can be procured from Kolckmann, Langham Place, London, W., are distinguished for their exquisite style, the author being both poet and scholar.